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ABSTRACT

This research project investigated adolescent group activity in a high school. Using participant observation, the researcher joined small, informal student groups to be able to describe and explain inschool activities and their relations to other features of the school environment. During five months of daily interaction with the students, the researcher participated in three groups that reflected these similar characteristics: (1) all were active social units with the members spending most of the day in one another's company; (2) distinct group activities took place when opportunities arose to interact; (3) group activities had little to do with the academic sector of the school; (4) group membership did not interfere with a particular member's academic achievement; (5) little cross-communication occurred between groups; and (6) all groups showed concern for and complied at least minimally with school regulations. These findings are explained as a pattern of behavior in response to the school environment. (Author/MLF)

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SOME STUDENT GROUPS AND THEIR SCHOOL PERSPECTIVE

by

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A number of researchers have demonstrated that adolescents divide themselves into small, informal groups and that the high school provides an important setting for activities and interactions among the members.[1] Because these groups can act as powerful determinents of human behavior, it was the intent of this research project to investigate adolescent group activity in school. Using the methodology of participant observation, the researcher attempted to join one or more of these student groups, and describe and explain their in-school activities and their relations to other features of the school environment. There were a number of exploratory questions.

1. Given organizational constraints, is it possible for students to carry on extended group activity in school?

2. Where is it possible to carry on group activity in school?

3. How does the group and individual members accommodate the demands of the organization?

4. How is a group viewed by other students, other student groups?

5. How does the school staff view the groups?

6. Is it possible for the school to utilize the group structure in pursuit of school goals?

Essentially what was sought, was the group "perspective," that common, ordered understanding the members have of their environment which enables them to act, when together, in accordance with their common beliefs about their situation, and which, in turn makes their beliefs seem reasonable according to the results of their acts.[2] The idea is based on the symbolic

interactionist premise that a group, just as a human being, is an active agent in creating its social existence. As the members interact with their environment, they form common beliefs about its nature and its relationship to them. Their group actions are then carried out in accordance with those beliefs. If those actions are successful, the beliefs are strengthened; if, unsuccessful, the group must restructure both its actions and beliefs to gain a more satisfactory result. This common, coordinated set of ideas and actions which the membership uses to deal with its environment is termed the group's "perspective." Of course, as the setting within school changes, a particular group may have not only a general perspective, but a number of situationally specific perspectives. It is this longitudinal process of constructing and carrying out group activities within a secondary school environment according to developed perspectives that this study sought to investigate.

Methodology

The methodology selected was that of participant observation. According to Geer:

> A participant observer in the field is at once reporter, interviewer, and scientist. On the scene, he gets the story of an event by questioning participants about what is happening and why. He fills out the story by asking the people about their relation to the event, their reactions, opinions and evaluation of its significance. As an interviewer, he encourages an informant to tell his story, or supply an expert account of the organization or group. As scientist, he seeks answers to question, setting up hypotheses and collecting data with which to test them.[3]

The researcher works at two levels. Continually becoming more and more a member of the social unit under study, he (1) describes the situation through his own and his subjects' senses, and (2) explains the situation through

both his own and his subjects' senses.

The process of actually becoming a member is the basis of the most serious objection to the methodology. That is, as the researcher more closely identifies with his subjects, he may lose his objectivity and become the subject of his own research. However, the issue here is the nature of social reality. According to symbolic interactionism, a social unit will create its own perspective according to the member's shared understandings of the environment. A true understanding of that unit should then require that the researcher actually take part in that process of creation. According to Blumer, "the study of action has to be made from the position of the actor; such action is forged by the actor out of what it perceives, interprets and judges, one has to see the situation as the actor sees it. You have to define and interpret the objects as the actor interprets them."[4] Given symbolic interactionism, proximity to the subject, rather than a detriment, becomes a condition which aids validity.

To accomplish the proximity, Homans suggests the researcher make use of six indices of subjective adequacy. He should: (1) spend a great deal of time with his subjects, (2) stay as geographically close to them as possible, (3) interact with them in a variety of circumstances, (4) learn and share their communication patterns, (5) achieve a high degree of intimacy and (6) assure himself that his interpretations have consensus with his subjects.[5] While the process of placing oneself in a foreign role is subtle and demanding, if one follows these suggestions, he will have some reasonable assurance that the findings reach an acceptable level of truthfulness.

Specifically in this project, the researcher intended to gain entrance to a public school through permission of the superintendent, principal, and teachers and then, while not actually pretending to be a student, develop a behavioral pattern as close to that of the students as possible. That is, attend classes with them, eat with them, go through the halls, to meetings and assemblies with them, and in general, try to construct his day as they do theirs. The second and initially more difficult part was to, after identifying specific groups, gain acceptance and achieve, over an extended period of time, a form of membership in one or more of those groups.

Selection of a Study Group

One who chooses participant observation is always faced with a problem regarding selection of the social unit. Since he is free to study only those who voice no objection to his continued presence and intent, there can be little prior planning as to the subjects' exact characteristics. At this point, the account by Margaret Mead of how she chose to study the Manus in Growing Up in New Guinea, proved valuable.

> The Manus tribe were chosen for a multitude of chance reasons, because a district officer recommended them as easy to deal with, because a missionary had published some texts in the language and because we were able to get a school boy in Rabaul to act as an interpreter in the beginning.[6]

In other words, when one had decided upon the general phenonmenon he wishes to study, in this case groupness among American high school students, the specific setting becomes secondary. While the researcher limits his population he gains specificity of detail. For exploratory research this approach seems reasonable.

Fortunately after a number of inquiries, there were two public and one Catholic high school from which to choose. While the major project was intended for a public school, the Catholic school offer was accepted by the researcher to conduct a six-week, pilot project in order to assure himself that the method was possible. After entering the school and carrying on the process as outlined day after day, he was satisfied that not only was the methodology feasible and fruitful, but that he was capable of carrying on an extended study.

The school district finally chosen for the project is adjacent to a medium sized, metropolitan area and draws into its one, modern high school 1100 students who come from a combination of upper-middle class and middle class suburbs, industrial areas, small villages and farms. Access to the school was granted by the superintendent and the principal, and access to the classrooms, cafeteria, student lounge and places where the students are found was granted by teachers. The research started on September 1969 and continued daily until February 1970. The writer presented himself to the students as "a university student looking for the ways students view schools." He discussed the matter with the vice-principal and the head of the English Department, who upon commenting, "He has to start somewhere," introduced him to three senior athletes, who agreed to allow him to accompany them through their school day. He found that initial acceptance by these three led to acceptance by other athletes, and by student leaders such as the senior class officers, the president of the Drama Club and the Honor Society, and a number of other students. Within the senior class of the high school, he was eventually allowed participant status within this one group composed primarily of athletes, maintained close ties with a group whose members controlled the extracurricular segment of the

school and interacted frequently with a third group whose central interest was stealing. All three groups were composed of six or seven students who were mostly from the same neighborhood, spent a large amount of time both in and out of school in one another's company, had a definite leader or some person who made decisions and initiated action, had definite standard patterns of and topics for interaction, and when asked admitted that they constituted a group. While it quickly became evident that one can be an actual member of no more than one group, the researcher maintained ties with other student groups and a number of apparently isolated individuals. As could be expected, there were dyads and triads within each group. A good deal of care was, therefore, taken to assure that a particular group under study was not merely a series of "best friendships" but constituted a social unit in itself.

The issue of the researcher's acceptability to the group members and other students was much easier to accomplish than to conceive. It was not his intent to become an adolescent but to become only a member of an adolescent group in school. While a youthful appearance probably helped, a firm belief that distances between people are caused more by specific role differentiation than by nature probably helped more. Taking off a former role of teacher-administrator and the suit, tie, official manner and didactic communication pattern that went with it, and putting on and accepting the group norms, behavior and dress, combined with an unthreatening manner, was really all that was needed. Of course, acceptance by and rapport with the group took time. It was not until late October that the invitation came to share in an evening in the saloon. But it was only a matter of a few weeks before the researcher's presence on the school scene was viewed as natural.

And throughout the study, he found that like W.F. Whyte in Street Corner Society, acceptance by the students depended not on an official explanation of his presence, but on personal relationships.[7]

While in school, the field work utilized six major approaches. (1) Attendance at classes. (2) Attendance at meetings such as student council, prom committee, drama club, ski club, yearbook and newspaper meetings. (3) Informal on the scene interviewing. (4) Eventual formal interviewing of the principals. (5) Observation, and (6) use of pertinent records as background material.[8] The information gained was compiled into 700 pages of notes which were classified and coded according to the event, participants, physical setting, time of occurances and reaction of the participants.[9] The events and statements of belief which occurred with greatest frequency in the first weeks were combined into tentative perspectives concerning particular situations. Subsequently, each tentative perspective was checked by further observation and by directly asking the group members and other students about its applicability to a particular situation. The perspectives that were verified by the subjects were considered to be part of the total group perspective. As the individual perspectives were identified and described, they were placed into a larger framework of total group perspective.

Findings

When reporting the results of a participant observation study, it is best to present, in some form, the compiled data so that the reader can judge the worth of the conclusions for himself. However, due to limitations, this summary will be presented as a series of responses to the initial questions. While specific instances involving particular groups will be cited, the primary intent is to present a perspective common to all the groups.

The first question was, "Is it possible, given organization contraints, for students to carry on extended group activity in school?" The answer is, "Yes." In fact, in the school which grouped its students according to age and somewhat more loosely according to ability, it was possible for a student to spend a large amount of time with his friends. They came to school, went to the lockers, lavatories, homerooms, classes, cafeteria, assemblies and activities together. Of course, any group had to separate because of different classes, but even there most could find at least one other member of their group. Few teachers made any consistent effort to prevent one from sitting with his friends every day, and after class there would be some opportunity for the entire group to gather in the halls, cafeteria, lounge or another class. They were physically together most of the time.

The next question is, "Were they able to interact and communicate as groups, or were they too deeply involved in academic activities?" The former is closer to the truth. They were not only together, but they had their own distinct activities. For instance, going to and from lockers and lavatories, having attendance taken, making announcements and moving all 1100 students from homeroom to class took the first thirty minutes of the day. Once in that class, they had to wait for the teacher to take attendance, accept late slips, collect homework, pass papers, etc. Even after class began, a few more minutes would be given to interruptions, passing and collecting papers and tests, minor discipline issues, etc. During the remainder of the class, since the teacher was usually interacting with only a few students, others could and sometimes did carry on subtle forms of in-group communication. Then at 9:40 all 1100 students would rise and go to the next session. It is not necessary to go

through a whole day to suggest that with heavy emphasis on teacher initiated action and on maintenance activity, there was both large and small blocks of time when students were expected to do little other than be present, waiting, watching and minimally complaining. During these periods of spectatorship, they could engage in their private conversations. And this did not disrupt the school as long as the teacher was not asking for their direct attention or involvement. When the teacher did ask for their attention, almost all students complied.

Which leads to the third question as to whether group activities were in conflict with the school goals. As previously mentioned, there were three groups and each of these had a central interest. The data across all consistently indicated that while in the group, students neither spoke of nor indicated concern over their teachers, assignments, readings, tests or grades. If a member did make some mention of one of those subjects, the topic was rarely picked up. Instead, their activity revolved around discussion of the previous evenings or weekend activities or involvement in on-going and future out-of-school activities. The researcher checked the perception with a large number of students and all agreed that it was correct. The groups under study did not make academic interests a topic of group concern. However, it is important to note that groups did not prevent individual members from cooperating with the school's academic sector as they wished; therefore, one could comply or not comply with particular academic demands without fear of ridicule. Therefore, the rewards of high marks, graduation and college acceptance promised by academic achievement did not conflict with the group behavior.

There is, however, one segment of the school organization with which all the groups showed concern and that is the maintenance sector with its rules

and regulations and their enforcement or non-inforcement. All groups gave at least minimal compliance to this subsystem and there were cases of groups taking action to prevent a particular member from abusing the rules to an extreme degree. This is quite reasonable given the situation. The groups could carry on their activities only so long as they did not interfere with the organization's smooth running. Their continued existence depended on accommodation with that subsystem.

The next question concerns the matter of how students in general viewed groupness. They clearly accepted it as a natural part of the school scene. They knew that their friends sat in this part of the room or that part of the cafeteria and that other students had their own friends and their own gathering places. It is surprising, however, that there was very little cross communication among the groups. In fact, it seemed that one literally did not see those with whom he did not associate. This, of course, make it especially important to have some friends, and there were a number of students who did not come to school because they had none, or who did not eat in the cafeteria because they had to eat alone. In addition,there were status differences between the groups with the more attractive and talented students gathering the rewards, but the lack of cross communication tended to make this seem less important than might be assumed.

A number of teachers indicated clear misconceptions about the groups and their activities. Many insisted that the day of the "cliques" was over and they would cite, as proof, a particular activity in which a number of the class became involved. They did not realize that the activity, as were the other extracurricular events, was supported by the students not as individuals but as groups. The particular play gave the athletes a chance to take similar

roles as members of a street gang, it gave the drama clique a chance to write, direct and take the leads, and it gave a number of popular cheerleaders a chance to perform together publicly. Other than those three groups, that activity drew little student involvement. In addition, the teachers, having their own concerns, tended to see the groups as a nuisance factor or perhaps even a threat to their own legitimate authority rather than as purposeful, social units.

The sixth question concerning the possible use of the groups for attainment of school ends will be dealt with following a general statement of the group perspectives and an explanation of those perspectives.

In sum, the groups under study consistently indicated a number of similar characteristics: (1) All were strong, active, social units with the members spending a large part of the school day in company with one another; (2) during their frequent opportunities to interact, they engaged in distinct group activities; (3) these activities had little or nothing to do with the academic sector of the school; (4) however group membership did not interfere with a particular member's academic achievement; (5) the groups were insular, that is they did not have much cross communication with other groups, and (6) all showed concern for and gave at least minimal compliance to the school maintenance subsystem.

An Explanation of the Findings

Having described the characteristics of the groups, it remains to explain them as somehow constituting a reasonable pattern of behavior in that environment. To begin, it is necessary to consider that environment. There are at least three important assumptions upon which secondary schools are

organized. These are (1) the assumption of compartmentalization of knowledge, (2) of future reward orientation and (3) of what Stinchecombe has referred to as "the doctrine of adolescent inferiority."[10] Following these assumptions, certain characteristics are built into the school organization. Compartmentalization of knowledge necessitates dividing the curriculum into a series of prescribed specialities and hiring teachers according to their specific skills. With the teacher as the expert, class time is taken up with his attempts to pass on his speciality to students. Thus we have the organizational characteristics of (1) teacher initiated and directed learning and (2) downward communication flow. It further follows that the school day should be divided as is the curriculum so a third characteristic, (3) the standardized routine, is implemented. The second assumption of future reward orientation which reinforces these three combines with the doctrine of adolescent inferiority to necessitate the creation of another school characteristic, that is (4) the body of impersonal rules and regulations which enforce compliance with the demands of the routine and the teachers.

These four characteristics are fully recognized and are, for the most part, regarded as being necessary to school and student orderliness, teacher productivity and the achievement of the school's goals. However, they also produce a number of effects which, combined, create a situation in which the existence of strong active student groups becomes perfectly reasonable, even necessary.

The first effect is a denial of differentiation among students. All are subject to the same body of impersonal rules and regulations, and to facilitate the information-passing process, all were herded around in large units according to the routine. The teachers, who are subject specialists,

not personnel specialists, had to deal with large numbers each period and therefore fail to significantly differentiate between students as individuals.

Similarly, students are denied a high degree of participation in the school's learning processes. It is up to that teacher with his expertise to initiate learning activity and while he is engaged in maintenance procedures, they are simply waiting and watching. Even when he is passing on the subject, if he is doing most of the talking, expressing, questioning, there is actually little opportunity for any single student to openly and actively express himself. They may answer a question, or make a point but in that large group, a teacher cannot let one student have more than a few minutes of expression each period. Also, the time taken by passing in the corridor, waiting in line or listening to announcements, all of which comes under the heading of routine, is for students, time spent in a state of spectatorship. Therefore, both in and out of class there is a large amount of time when students are not engaged in anything that could be called formal learning processes.

In effect, teacher centeredness, routinization of activity and downward communication can create a situation wherein (1) students are for the most part undifferentiated, and (2) student participation is not encouraged.

There is a third unanticipated effect which can result from the impersonal body of rules and regulations accompanying the routine. As suggested by Gouldner, rules and regulations lead to a knowledge among subordinates of minimally acceptable forms of behavior.[11] This is what seemed to occur in that school. When the "no smoking" rule can be safely violated, when and under what circumstances one has to have a legitimately signed pass, when a pass can be successfully forged, or a class orstudy hall skipped, when one has to have his assignments done; these subtle lines between acceptable and unacceptable

forms of behavior were important to the students and in effect can become a central part to the group perspective.

In sum, there is a possibility of three unanticipated consequences inherent in the school's formal organization; (1) denial of student participation, (2) denial of student differentiation and (3) knowledge of minimally acceptable forms of behavior on the part of the students.

The question then is, what is possible for students to do for that part of the school day during which there might be little need for their active participation or intellectural and emotional involvement? They do not move into some state of mental limbo or suspended animation. They are alive, alert and as such constantly seeking ways to fulfill their basic needs for inclusion, participation and interaction. However, one does not fulfill these by watching the teacher and select others perform, by being one of a line in the cafeteria, or a large mass moving down a hall, or one in a series being counted, directed, corrected or instructed.

So, how are these needs satisfied? The answer is that they utilize that group structure which has been built up over a period of years, is always present wherever they are and can easily be drawn into the school to take up that energy, enthusiasm and involvement left untouched by the school's formal processes. If the school organization masses and fails to differentiate them, keeps them in a state of spectatorship, provides little teacher-student interaction, and gives them primarily future-reward orientation; the groups can easily segregate with little cross communication, provide their members with a degree of independence and power over their activities, and give them immediate pleasure of participation in human events. Furthermore, the school with its emphasis on teacher-initiated action, routinization, batch processing and maintenance procedures may provide

a considerable amount of time when students are required to do little other than be in attendance and minimally complain. It is then that students carry on their group activities.

In response to this organization situation, the groups under study developed a perspective of non or limited involvement with the school's productive subsystem and minimal compliance with the school's maintenance subsystem. This perspective enabled the group to continue their existence, reward their members with interaction, participation and recognition, and avoid interfering with a member's attainment of the other rewards promised by academic achievement.

It is especially important that, although these groups may have as their central interests cars, sports, the opposite sex, or even stealing, their activity did not disrupt the school routine. By emphasizing selected leadership, prescribed roles and normative behavior, groups were really quite orderly and provided the school with strong support for the maintenance subsystem. Had the school been asked to provide the students with involvement and participation, its organization probably would have to seriously change. But with these immediate need-satisfying structures present in groups, the school is left to deal with its own academic processes. Thus in response to question six, strong student groups, whatever their central interest, can and probably do provide strong support for the maintenance subsystem of school organization and in that sense are actually being utilized to achieve school goals. However, given that present form of school organization there is probably little chance of using student groups for the achievement of academic goals.

FOOTNOTES

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